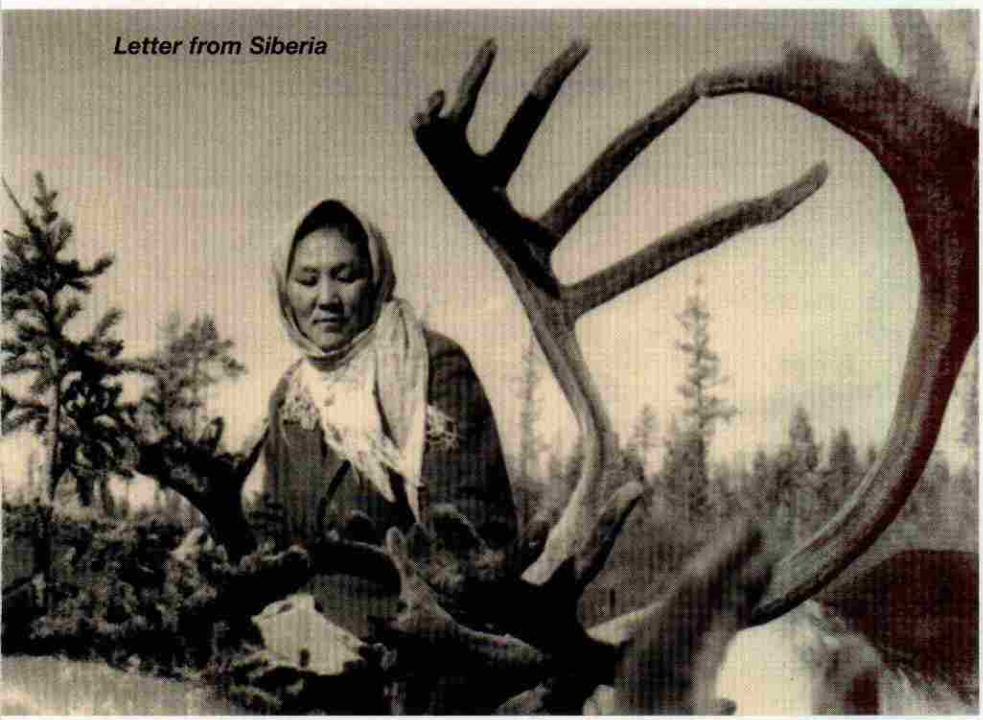
VISIT…

Bazin on Marker

IN A NEW, NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED TRANSLATION, LEGENDARY FILM CRITIC ANDRÉ BAZIN HERALDS THE CINEMA OF THE FUTURE.

Chris Marker, as you may remember, wrote the narration for *Bibliothèque Nationale* (*Toute la mémoire du monde*) and *Statues Also Die* (which the public still has only been able to see in a version cut to half its length by the censorship board). These incisive, powerful texts, in which cutting irony plays hide and seek with poetry, would be enough to secure their author a privileged place in the field of short filmmaking, currently the liveliest fringe of the French cinema. As the writer of the narrations for these films by his friend Resnais, with whom he shares a marvelous understanding, Chris Marker has already profoundly altered the visual relationship between text and image. But his ambition was obviously even more radical, and it became necessary for him to make his own films.



Letter from Siberia

First there was *Sunday in Peking*, which justly won a prize at the 1956 Festival of Tours, and now, at last, there is the extraordinary *Letter from Siberia*. Admirable as *Sunday in Peking* was, it was also slightly disappointing, in that the restrictions of the short format seemed inadequate for such a big subject. And it also has to be said that the images, while often very beautiful, did not supply sufficient documentary material in the end. It left us wanting more. But the seed of the dialectic between word and image that Marker would go on to sow in *Letter from Siberia* was already there. In the new film, it grows to the dimensions appropriate to a feature film, and takes the weight.

"A Documentary Point of View"

How to describe *Letter from Siberia*? Negatively, at first, in pointing out that it resembles absolutely nothing that we have ever seen before in films with a documentary basis —films with "a subject." But then it becomes necessary to say what it is. Flatly and objectively, it is a film report from a Frenchman given the rare privilege of traveling freely in Siberia, covering several thousand kilometers. Although in the last three years we have seen several film reports from French travelers in Russia, *Letter from Siberia* resembles none of them. So, we must take a closer look. I would propose the following approximate description: *Letter from Siberia* is an essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to borrow Jean Vigo's formulation of *À propos de Nice* ("a documentary point of view"), I would say, an essay documented by film. The important word is "essay," understood in the same sense that it has in literature — an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well.

Generally, even in politically engaged documentaries or those with a specific point to make, the image (which is to say, the uniquely cinematic element) effectively constitutes the primary material of the film. The orientation of the work is expressed through the choices made by the filmmaker in the montage, with the commentary completing the organization of the sense thus conferred on the document. With Marker it works quite differently. I would say that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence. The usual process is reversed. I will risk another metaphor: Chris Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call "horizontal," as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn't refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said.

From the Ear to the Eye

Better, it might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard, that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye. Because of space limitations, I will describe only a single example, which

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is also the film's most successful moment. Marker presents us with a documentary image that is at once full of significance and completely neutral: a street in Irkutsk. We see a bus going by and workers repairing the roadway, and then at the end of the shot a fellow with a somewhat strange face (or at least, little blessed by nature) who happens to pass in front of the camera. Marker then comments on these rather banal images from two opposed points of view: first, that of the Communist party line, in the light of which the unknown pedestrian becomes "a picturesque representative of the north country," and then in that of the reactionary perspective, in which he becomes "a troubling Asiatic."

This single, thought-provoking antithesis is a brilliant stroke of inspiration in itself, but its wit remains rather facile. It's then that the author offers a third commentary, impartial and minutely detailed, that objectively describes the unhappy Mongol as "a cross-eyed Yakout." And this time we are way beyond cleverness and irony, because what Marker has just demonstrated is that objectivity is even more false than the two opposed partisan points of view; that, at least in relation to certain realities, impartiality is an illusion. The operation we have observed is thus precisely dialectic, consisting of placing the same image in three different intellectual contexts and following the results.

Intelligence and Talent

In order to give the reader a complete sense of this unprecedented enterprise, it remains for me to point out that Chris Marker does not restrict himself to using documentary images filmed on the spot, but uses any and all filmic material that might help his case—including still images (engravings and photos), of course, but also animated cartoons. Like McLaren, he does not hesitate to say the most serious things in the most comic way (as in the sequence with the mammoths). There is only one common denominator in this firework display of technique: intelligence. Intelligence and talent. It is only just to also point out that the photography is by Sacha Vierny, the music the work of Pierre Barbaud, and that the narration is excellently read by Georges Rouquier.

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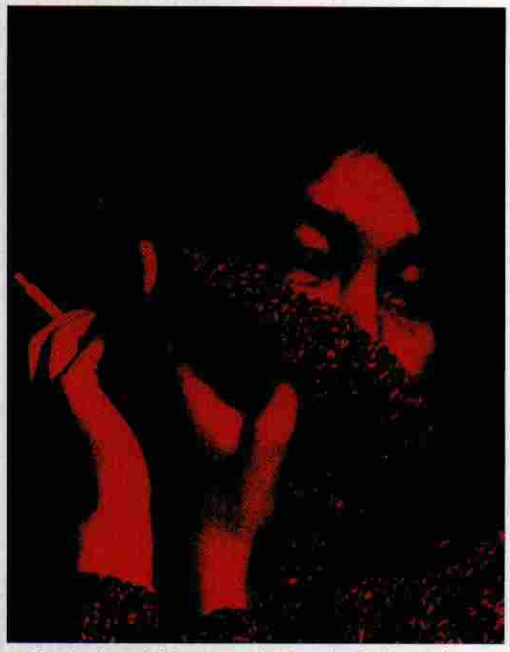
La Jetée (1962, 28m)
Presented (almost) entirely as a sequence of still images with voiceover narration, *La Jetée* tells the story of a man possessed by an image from his childhood who is subjected to time travel experiments after World War III. Marker's best-known film and one of cinema's most original and haunting works, *La Jetée* brings into pristine focus Marker's abiding preoccupations with time, memory, death, and the image. Remade by Terry Gilliam in 1995 as *12 Monkeys*.



Le Joli Mai (1962, co-d. with Pierre Lhomme; Part 1: Prière sur la Tour Eiffel. Part 2: Le retour de Fantômas; 165m)
A revealing portrait of French society at the close of the Algerian War, made up of interviews with a cross-section of Parisians who discuss their hopes, fears, and beliefs. Marker's first venture into cinéma vérité, *Le Joli Mai* illuminates the sharp contradictions of French society by granting its subjects the space to voice their opinions, then uses montage to highlight and compare radically different experiences and values.

The Koumiko Mystery / Le Mystère Koumiko (1965, 54m)
A meeting with a young Japanese woman during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics leads to an extended correspondence when the narrator-filmmaker returns to Paris. As well as being an homage to the French New Wave, *The Koumiko Mystery* marks the beginning of Marker's fascination with Japan, and pokes gentle fun at the new trend of market research by asking in what terms we can really know another human being.

If I Had Four Camels / Si j'avais quatre dromedaires (1966, 49m)
A photographer and two of his friends peruse and comment upon photographs taken all over the world during the previous decade. Composed like *La Jetée*, this meditation on what photographs mean and why they are taken is a prototype for later projects like *Sans soleil*, *Zapping Zone*, and *Immemory*, in which Marker offers a map of his own memory by sifting through images he has made in the past.

Far from Vietnam / Loin du Viêt-nam (1967, 115m)
Marker organized and edited this collective anti–Vietnam War film, featuring contributions by Resnais, Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, and Claude Lelouche. Key for its presentation of both the necessity and limits of political protest on the part of Western filmmakers and intellectuals, *Far from Vietnam* was the first film produced by SLON (Société pour la lancement des œuvres nouvelles). (Segments by Agnès Varda and Ruy Guerra were omitted from the final version, although Marker insisted that they receive onscreen credit.)

The Sixth Face of the Pentagon / La Sixième face du Pentagone (1968; co-d. with François Reichenbach, 28m)
This early SLON short documents the October 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam

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